

Contact editor at: editor@theArabweekly.com

Good actions can be bad politics as Germany shows

Rashmee Roshan Lall

is a columnist for The Arab Weekly. Her blog can be found at www.rashmee.com and she is on Twitter: @rashmeerl.



“Like many other countries, Germany has mixed feelings and a great many doubts about the influx of outsiders.”

Until late on November 19, no one really thought that being a Good Samaritan would make for bad politics. Would a leader who acted humanely be unjustly rewarded with political perdition?

Then, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's seven-week attempts to cobble together a governing coalition fell apart. And the unspoken truth became clear: Good actions are not necessarily good politics. Merkel's 2015 act of shining humanity – taking in 1.2 million refugees mainly from Syria – has been rebuked, if not punished outright. At the ballot box in late September, her party did rather less well than expected but still received a plurality vote. Voters also gave the far-right, anti-immigrant, Islam-bashing Alternative for Germany (AfD) party a place in the Bundestag, the first time since immediately after World War II that such a political formulation had achieved this distinction. And Merkel's attempt to forge a coalition government ran into the cold hard reality of Germany's suppressed feelings about migrants and refugees.

There is no other way to see the current political impasse. Three of the four parties in the potential coalition – Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), its sister outfit, the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) – tried to outdo each other on a harder line on migration controls. The Greens, the fourth member of the coalition, eventually suggested a compromise: a hard ceiling for annual immigrant numbers, but also the right for migrants already in Germany to be reunited with their families.

By all accounts, the issues that



Impasse. German Chancellor Angela Merkel arrives for further exploratory talks with members of potential coalition parties to form a new government, on November 13. (AFP)

mattered most in the failed coalition talks were, in order of importance, migration policy, the future of coal and regional financial rebalancing.

How did Germany get to the point its government coalition negotiations are deadlocked on the issue of migrants? In 2015 and 2016, many Germans seemed to embrace the immense task of housing and caring for the uninformed new arrivals. Oberhausen is a case in point. The city, in the western region of North Rhine-Westphalia, which took in more refugees in 2015 than anywhere else in Germany, proudly boasted a big welcome culture in the early days of the migrant arrivals.

Merkel announced at a press

conference as the multitudes knocked on Germany's door: “We can do this.” Despite some muttering, the German people stuck with her prescription. Even now, after her coalition talks have fallen through, Merkel remains the country's second most popular politician after Wolfgang Schauble, president of the Bundestag.

Last year, German political scientists were diagnosing the country's psychological response to the refugees as acute penance and the need for redemption from history. Germans, they said, remembered the historical stain of the Holocaust, the inhumanity of the Nazis and the experience of German Jewish refugees fleeing in desperation. They were eager

to make clear Germany is no longer a country of Nazis and the Syrian refugees provided a way to do this.

It seemed to be paying off. For the past two years, Germany has basked in the awed admiration of the international media. “Germany's open-door policy in migrant crisis casts nation in a new light,” proclaimed the Los Angeles Times. “Angela Merkel hailed as an angel of mercy,” said the Sydney Morning Herald.

It seemingly marked the next steps in an international rehabilitation project that Germany began in 1948 as a direct reaction to the Holocaust. The Basic Law of that year guaranteed the right to asylum. According to Matthias Mayer of the Integration and Education programme at the Bertelsmann Stiftung foundation, it “reflected the responsibility that the country continues to shoulder for its past... Never should people fleeing persecution or death be denied protection... Germany has prided itself on being a safe haven for those in need.”

So what happened two years after the Syrians and others surged into Germany and received refuge? In Oberhausen, for instance, six months after the migrants arrived, locals were starting to view them as a strain on the local economy. It was not outright hostility but caution.

It would be fair to say this sentiment is now somewhat shared across Germany. Like many other countries, it has mixed feelings and a great many doubts about the influx of outsiders. Politicians in Merkel's sister party have called the chancellor's open-door policy an “unprecedented political mistake,” which indicates the level of perceived risk of the humanitarian grand gesture.

Zarrab's oil-for-gold case further strains US-Turkish relations

Yavuz Baydar

is a Turkish journalist and regular columnist for The Arab Weekly.



“Erdogan's strategy is to turn national sentiment against the US, even as he tries to obscure the reality and implications of the Zarrab case.”

Until about a year ago, only a few Turkey observers were aware of the explosive nature of an oil-for-gold case in a far-off

US federal court in New York. Very few paid attention to what was really at play and its possible ramifications for Turkish-American relations.

Now, everyone is taking notice of the trial of Turkish-Iranian gold trader Reza Zarrab on charges of evading US sanctions on Iran.

Zarrab's trial is due to start but his whereabouts are a mystery, leading to speculation he has cut a deal and agreed to become a US government witness. What effect might any of this have on Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and on the country's relationship with the United States?

There is almost no analysis worth the name, simply because the chain of events is so unprecedented and many of Turkey's most acute political commentators have appeared unaware of the seismic change in the country's

approach to the world.

They remain oblivious to the global disorder caused by Turkish foreign policy and to the fact that Turkish diplomacy has become hostage to a new form of feudalism.

It has brought forth institutionalised disrespect or, at the very least, disregard for the rule of law, judicial independence and Turkey's traditional alliances. The new order, which includes transactional partnerships, appears to allow for the intimidation and imprisonment of dissidents, both domestic and foreign, and the swap of political or other foreign-national prisoners.

Much of this has to do with the culture of impunity now creeping into Turkey and many other democracies. This is the context of the Zarrab case, which is due to begin December 4 in New York.

The magnitude and impact of this case for the Turkish government is hard to overstate.

Zarrab, a gold trader, is charged with running a complex scheme to evade US sanctions imposed on Iran over its nuclear programme.

He is accused of selling gold to the Islamic Republic in return for oil. Another top suspect, bank manager Mehmet Hakan Atilla, is accused of helping to launder the proceeds through the state-owned Halkbank. Seven other suspects now in US custody are also charged with involvement in the plot. They include Turkey's former economy minister, Zafer Caglayan.

The case has further strained relations between Turkey and the United States. Ruling Justice and Development (AKP) party circles, backed by a loud chorus of pro-government Turkish media, accuse Washington of trying to dislodge Erdogan. It would be, they say, “a second coup” after the failed one in July 2016.

Indeed the politics of the Zarrab case appears to be taking centre stage, at least in Turkey. The rage that grips Ankara has already been apparent in Turkish ministers' tense visits to Washington. The Zarrab case apparently topped the agenda of most meetings.

There was also a bloody brawl outside the Turkish Embassy in

Washington when Erdogan's security detail allegedly beat peaceful Kurdish protesters. More recently, there have been the arrests of Turkish staff members of US missions in Turkey.

All of these constitute an escalation, one that disrupts the calm basis of Turkish-American partnership, which has lasted more than 70 years.

Unsurprisingly, the US Congress is shocked and angry and its reaction is mirrored by legislators in Ankara.

And yet, Erdogan's ruling AKP continues to play on anti-Americanism.

Erdogan's strategy is to turn national sentiment against the US, even as he tries to obscure the reality and implications of the Zarrab case.

Among the Turkish government's potential concerns about the case is that Zarrab's testimony might point a finger at high-level officials involved in sanctions-busting. There is some suggestion the finger-pointing could reach as far as Erdogan.

It is all gossip, until it's not.

The Arab Weekly

Published by Al Arab Publishing House

Publisher and Group Executive Editor
Haitham El-Zobaidi, PhD

Editor-in-Chief
Oussama Romdhani

Managing Editor
Iman Zayat

Deputy Managing Editor and Online Editor
Mamoon Alabbasi

Senior Editor
John Hendel

Chief Copy Editor
Richard Pretorius

Copy Editor
Stephen Quillen

Analysis Section Editor
Ed Blanche

East/West Section Editor
Mark Habeeb

Gulf Section Editor
Mohammed Alkhereiji

Society and Travel Sections Editor
Samar Kadi

Syria and Lebanon Section Editor
Simon Speakman Cordall

Contributing Editor
Rashmee Roshan Lall

Senior Correspondents
Mahmud el-Shafey (London)
Lamine Ghanmi (Tunis)

Regular Columnists
Claude Salhani
Yavuz Baydar

Correspondents
Saad Guerraoui (Casablanca)
Dunia El-Zobaidi (London)
Roua Khelifi (Tunis)
Thomas Seibert (Washington)

Chief Designer
Marwen el-Hmedi

Designers
Ibrahim Ben Bechir
Hanan Jebali

Subscription & Advertising:
Ads@alarab.co.uk
Tel 020 3667 7249

Mohamed Al Mufti
Marketing & Advertising
Manager

Tel (Main) +44 20 7602 3999
Direct: +44 20 8742 9262
www.alarab.co.uk

US Publisher:
Ibrahim Zobeidi
(248) 803 1946

Al Arab Publishing House
Quadrant Building
177-179 Hammersmith Road
London W6 8BS

Tel: (+44) 20 7602 3999
Fax: (+44) 20 7602 8778